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ABSTRACT

Several aspects of the attitudes held by teachers of American Indian children toward their own and other cultures need to be studied. Recommended research topics along these lines include: (1) a study of the teacher subculture where teachers of Indian pupils live in a distinct enclave, with emphasis upon characteristic attitudes toward Indians generally and pupils particularly and the daily experiences and interactions that maintain and strengthen these attitudes; (2) a study of the social situation of teachers of Indian pupils in an integrated school in a small town or city, with emphasis upon attitudes of teachers and their social interaction in the community; (3) a study of the attitudes of the supervisory force of penal reformatory institutions toward Indian inmates, toward Indian society and culture, and toward American society and its cultures; and (4) a study of the attitudes of teachers toward Indian pupils in urban situations where Indian pupils are a small minority among other minority groups. It is recommended that the strategy of participant observation be employed for these studies, preferably at 2 or 3 sites wherein a series of small interrelated subprojects could be implemented. (LS)

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THE TEACHERS OF AMERICAN INDIAN CHILDREN:
ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR OWN & OTHER CULTURES

A Position Paper
Submitted to
Southwestern Cooperative Educational Laboratory

By
Murray L. Wax

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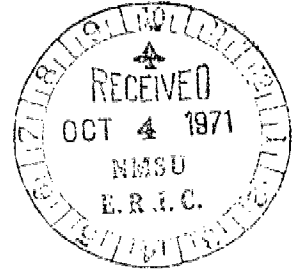
THE TEACHERS OF AMERICAN INDIAN CHILDREN:
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Murray L. Wax

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Previous Research

The literature on teachers of Indian children has recently been summarized by Brewton Berry (1969:36-41). He notes that:

It is surprising . . . that so little research has been directed to the teachers, especially when compared to the volume of research on other aspects of Indian education.

The older literature on Indian education was extremely critical of the caliber of those recruited as teachers, but the more recent studies find this less of a problem. Nonetheless, Berry (1969:37) cites Farmer's statement that "'many loopholes exist for hiring substandard teachers (among the Navajo),' and the older teachers fail to meet the standards applied to those newly appointed". Equally important is the problem of turnover among teachers in Indian schools, a characteristic which means that the teacher does not come to know the children, their elders and their problems, and conversely, the elders do not come to know how to relate to the teacher. Turnover is not merely a problem confined to Indian schools and federal reservations, but it is characteristic of many school areas, especially the rural. Since Indian children are now attending public schools in increasing numbers, the questions of the caliber and the attitude

of teachers or of their rates of turnover are no longer exclusively ones of federal schools on Indian reservations but need also be considered in whatever localities the Indian children are concentrated.

In his review Berry also notes that those who teach Indians have frequently been characterized as being of parochial backgrounds and as being prejudiced toward Indians. Both of these characteristics relate to the pattern of recruitment of teachers, who most often derive from isolated rural areas, frequently near the reservation where they then teach, and so import with themselves into the classroom the attitudes of local lower middle class persons. In defense of its educational system, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has argued that the quality of its instruction compares favorably with that offered in comparable situations by public schools in the states where Indians are concentrated. Doubtless, this is true, and there is even ground for asserting that some of the comparable BIA facilities are superior to those of rural public schools; however, it could well be retorted that for children coming from cultural and linguistic background as different from that within the school building as that of most Indian children, the need is for that type of superior educational performance which could be offered only by educators who understood and appreciated their pupils.

Given the parochial and prejudiced background of most teachers, there would seem to be a marked need for programs of orientation and training which would prepare the novice teacher for the exigencies of the Indian schoolroom. While such training programs have been offered, they have not been regularized and only too frequently (as was noted by the Waxses and

Dumont, 1964), they serve to orient the educators to the school system (and the Indian community. For example, despite the fact that many Indian children enter the schoolroom without a mastery of English of their primary language, very few teachers have any training in teaching English as a second language. Again, the most successful training programs for teachers are likely to be those which insure intimate contact between the teacher and the elders of the local Indian community via such a system as house calls; however, such programs are expensive to operate, since they require of the teacher a considerable amount of time in visiting and of travel; and usually the novice teacher requires some support in the undertaking, whereas all too often he is discouraged from venturing forth.

If we turn for illumination to the general body of literature in educational research for studies of teachers, we are liable to disappointment. While there have been a great many projects which have investigated via questionnaire one or another aspect of "teacher attitudes", there are almost no studies of how the role of teacher is acquired and what attitudes are absorbed by what experiences in dealing with pupils, administrators, parents, and teacher colleagues. There are some fine beginnings in the work of Estelle Fuchs and Elizabeth Eddy deriving from Project True, but their researches have not systematically been continued and elaborated.

Research Needs

1. Where the teachers of Indian pupils live in a distinct enclave, as in the typical situation on the reservation with "an administrative compound" located near the school (day or boarding), then it is likely that

most of the interaction of teachers will be either with fellow teachers or with governmental administrators. In this tight enclaved society, a distinct subculture is developed with characteristic attitudes towards Indians generally and pupils particularly. Such a subculture is best studied via community study procedures using participant observation. While shrewdly devised questionnaire schedules could elicit some of the crucial attitudes, the significant issue is the nature of the daily experiences and interactions which serve to maintain and strengthen these bodies of attitudes. Assuming that large boarding schools such as Chilocco or Haskell are to be continued, studies of their teacher society are especially to be desired.

2. Where Indians are a significant minority in an integrated school in a small town or city, then the social situation of the teachers would be quite different from that described in #1. Instead of an enclave of teachers and administrators, we would expect to encounter a stratified society -- a modern version of the small towns described a generation and more ago by James West, Art Gallaher, Jr., A. B. Hollingshead, et al. Given that few such studies have been replicated in recent years and none in the case of towns with significant proportions of Indians in consolidated schools, there would well be reason to suggest that repeat studies are now in order with central focus (as in the case of Elmtown) on the school and within the school (as was not the case of Elmtown) on the society of teachers. Again, here, it might be possible to say that the attitudes of teachers could be investigated directly, but, again, here it should be recognized that teacher attitudes are not independent of the position of teachers in the social structure of the school and the town, nor are the attitudes of teachers independent of the attitudes of the town middle class.

3. In some states Indian children are a distinct proportion in the ~~penal~~ reformatory situation. For example, in the State of South Dakota, as described in a legislative report of 1955, "in the State Training School. . . approximately 25 per cent of the boys are Indians and approximately 50 per cent of the girls are Indians" (cited by Stewart 1964). In these situations, it would be extremely significant to discover the attitudes of the supervisory force toward the Indian inmates, toward Indian society and culture, and toward the general American society and its cultures.

4. In urban settings, Indian children are typically a small minority of the school population and are concentrated -- to the extent that they are -- chiefly in lower class schools which also have significant proportions of Negroes or Spanish-Americans or other lowerclass minorities. Under the circumstances, little would be gained by studying teacher attitudes and experiences in depth, unless the project researcher wanted to understand the general configuration of attitudes of teachers toward lowerclass ethnic pupils. Here, then, insofar as Indians remain the central focus of interest adequate information might be gained via a combination of the following: (a) observation of schoolrooms where Indians are present, (b) interviews with their teachers and with educational administrators, (c) interviews with a sample of parental elders.

5. Insofar as special programs of orientation for teachers of Indian pupils have been developed and conducted, whether by the BIA, universities, or other agencies, it would be of some value to review them and their impacts. This could be done by surveying the relevant educational literatures, in order to locate the descriptions of the projects and the reports of their

activities and evaluations. It could also be done by interviewing teachers still in the system and requesting their appraisals of the various programs which they have experienced, and comparing this latter with an assessment of competencies of the teacher in dealing with Indian children and the Indian community.

Methodological Considerations

In assessing the attitudes of those who teach Indian children it would be especially important to place the teacher in his role and within the context of the social organizations of which he is a part. Individuals become teachers by virtue of their position in an organization and their interactions with pupils, educational administrators, parents, and colleagues, and by virtue of the demands placed upon them by these categories of persons, and the rewards given to them (including pay and promotion) for the accomplishment of certain tasks. Teacher attitudes do not exist in vacuum, as a disembodied attribute of the isolated teacher. Rather, such attitudes are established and maintained by the daily social lives of the teachers and the nature of their responsibilities. Accordingly, if any understanding of these attitudes is to be acquired, it would have to be by means of an investigation of the societies and cultures of the teachers. The standard research via structured questionnaire, which characterizes so much of the discipline of education, can generate meaningful and useful results only if a proper context of interpretation has first been established. Hence, the stress in this position paper on research studies using community study methodology (cf. Vidich Bensman & Stein 1964; also Hollingshead [West

Withers], etc; and Wax, Wax & Dumont) including the use of participant observation (R.H. Wax 1968).

The community study aspects of this research would best be handled as a series of interrelated small subprojects, each conducted by a single person or small team. While the work of the several teams would be integrated via a Principal Investigator, each team would have considerable autonomy in adapting itself to its local environment. Small teams of lowly ranking people (e.g. graduate students) are less threatening in their conduct of participantly observing research and are more likely to be able to elicit frank statements or to be able to observe the typical patterns of teacher-pupil interaction.

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"The Teachers of American Indian Children:
Attitudes Toward Their Own and Other Cultures"

by Murray L. Wax

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Dr. Wax has successfully outlined the major issues bearing on the attitudes of those who teach American Indian students. My following comments are primarily elaborative.

Research Needs

(See the preceding paper by Wax for the first five research needs.)

6. Because social origin is closely related to attitudes it is desirable that research attention be given to the life and career histories of teachers of Indian students. Preliminary research suggests that alterations in B.I.A. recruitment procedures are necessary before there can be any significant shift in the undesirable attitudes often held by boarding school teachers. If overrepresentation of lower class whites on these teaching staffs is as pronounced as we are told, then certainly altered recruitment is essential to improvement. Before this can be done researchers must develop more adequate information on the life and career histories of boarding school and other teachers recruited by the B.I.A. and similar agencies entrusted with educating Indian students.

7. Heavy emphasis has been given to recruiting Indian teachers for Indian students. Many assert that because of their attitudes and social origin Indian are superior choices to non-Indians; there is little concrete evidence for this belief. Even if they were superior there would still be many unanswered questions. For example, what are the effects of recruiting Indian teachers of

different tribal backgrounds than those of their Indian students, e.g., Chippewa teachers for Navajo students? What are the effects of Indian teacher aides used with non-Indian teachers? There is little doubt that Indian students can profit from Indian teachers, but we need to know more about their effects and how they can be placed in culturally compatible school settings. Only systematic comparisons of various types of Indian teachers in different contexts can answer these and similar questions.

8. Often the attitudes of school administrators are more important than those of teachers in educational decisions affecting Indians. For example, the coaching background of many administrators suggests that they probably are untrained to make education decisions affecting Indian students. Moreover their close identification with the school board and local power groups often make them insensitive to the needs of minorities. Their important influence in hiring and curriculum decisions calls for intensive research into their attitudes and life and career histories. It is probable that few improvements in the education of Indian students are possible while administration is in the hands of improperly trained non-Indians whose primary allegiance is to the school board and non-Indian power groups.

Methodological Considerations

(See the preceding paper by Wax for discussion of interview techniques and criteria for selecting investigators.)

Because of the sociocultural diversity of contemporary American Indians, it is often difficult to generalize from research findings. Consequently, researchers must give attention to broad surveys. It is obvious to experienced researchers that teacher and administrator attitudes in Oklahoma boarding schools contrast sharply with those on the Navajo Reservation. Conversely,

there are surprising correspondences between the attitudes of teachers and administrators on the Red Lake Chippewa and Nez Perce Indian reservations. Before policy decisions based on research can be made at the national and regional levels, it is essential that we have follow-up surveys on the generality of research findings. Otherwise, we shall simply perpetuate the common bureaucratic practice of applying inflexible programs to which there are many local exceptions.

Proper measurement of teacher and administrator attitudes will require parallel assessment of student opinion. Psychologists and sociologists have adequately demonstrated the human capacity for self-delusion. Attitudes denied by one group will be attributed to them by members of related groups. Indian students readily sense many covert attitudes in non-Indian teachers and administrators, and their opinion on such attitudes is an important corrective for interpretation of teacher and administrator responses. Research designs should provide for this corrective whenever possible.

A final methodological caution concerns the common absence of control groups in most research on American Indian education. For unknown reasons most research conclusions have been drawn without benefit of either Indian or non-Indian control groups. Most researchers have presented their findings as descriptive assertions. The rare use of adequate experimental safeguards reflects the primitive state of much research on Indian education. Future assessment of teacher and administrator attitudes must incorporate such safeguards.